

On August 28, 2009, Klickitat County will mail property tax assessment notices to property owners in Area 2, which includes the communities of Dallesport, Murdock, Lyle, Klickitat and Glenwood, that reflect, on average, a 60 percent increase in value. The assessments are not taxes; property value is just the measure other government entities and elected officials use to apply taxes.

County Assessor Van Vandenberg has been a county taxpayer himself for the nine years he's been county assessor. He said he expects a lot of people will read the notice and say: "Van, you're crazy as hell. Do you have any idea what's going on?"

Yes, there's a recession, and the real estate marketplace is nothing like four years ago – when property in Area 2 was last evaluated.

This is the second time in Vandenberg's tenure that he's done property tax assessments during a real estate downturn. The world wide recession has trickled down to Klickitat County, and there are substantially fewer property sales now than four years ago, although to date few if any sales have come in at a substantial loss to the property owner.

Still, because of our county's current four-year cycle of property revaluation, the gains in value made in 2005-07 are greater than the drops in value of 2008.

"If I didn't do this for a living, I would assume property values are down. If I got a revaluation notice for this kind of an increase in a market like this, I'd have to think the guy is a total idiot," Vandenberg said.

But the numbers back him up.

By law, the county must appraise property at 100 percent of fair market value for the four-year period of January 1, 2005 to January 1, 2009.

In the first three years, 2005-2007, real estate value in the County increased an average of more than eighty percent. During the last half of the year, 2008, some values have dropped 20 to 25 percent. Taken together, the figures still represent an increase for most properties.

Higher, lower

Some property value increases will be higher than 60 percent, some lower. The properties along the Columbia and Klickitat Rivers and those with one or more mountain views have proven to be in high demand. Wooded twenty-acre parcels along Glenwood Highway were also hot sellers in the time frame in question. Only a few areas have not shown greatly increased value, in part because there have been fewer sales.

"On a percentage basis, the land your home sits on increases in value faster than the home itself," Vandenberg notes.

There are still properties on the market for much higher than the assessed value. A 5.05-acre parcel in Lyle with a home and views of the Columbia River and Mount Hood is listed for sale at \$490,000. Its new assessed value is \$324,600, up from \$203,600 in 2005. Another home on 2 acres in Lyle with a Mount Adams view is listed for \$509,000; its old assessed value was \$174,400 and the new value is \$266,100. A more modest home on a lot in Klickitat lists for \$247,500; the new assessed value is \$82,800. A similar home on an acre in Glenwood lists for \$239,500; the assessed value is now \$112,800.

Special analysis

County appraisers process neighborhoods one at a time through the revaluation cycle, so decisions must be made early in the year regarding value, Vandenberg explained. But after the values are set, his staff analyzes several months of sales figures on either side of the January 1 deadline. This year, the staff has examined every sale for the last six months of 2008 and the first six months of 2009.

Also, the staff is tracking the sales in the County completed after the revaluation process was finished on May 31, 2009. Of ten sales across the area from January 6, 2009 to July 31, 2009, all ranged from 94 to 108 percent of assessed value. "That's a good report card," Vandenberg said, indicating the new assessed values are fair to the marketplace.

Appeal your value

Property owners can petition the county Board of Equalization for an assessment change. Vandenberg urges people with questions to first contact the assessor's office in the courthouse. Appraisers will share the information used to develop individual assessments. A reinspection can be requested.

Owners have until Monday, September 28, to officially file an appeal of their 2009 property tax value assessments. Hand-deliver your appeal to the commissioners' office in the courthouse or mail it to the Klickitat County Board of Equalization, 205 S Columbus, MS-CH 4, Goldendale, WA 98620.

No more 'comps'

Vandenberg is revamping how his office will approach the typical Board of Equalization appeal process. Traditionally, the property owner picks three comparable properties from the same neighborhood and the assessor picks three "comps," and they make a case to the appeals board. Naturally, the property owner and county would pick the three comps they thought would best serve their cases.

"There will be no wrestling matches this year," Vandenberg said. "Everyone will have exactly the same information. We are not going to get into an argument with our fellow property owners."

County taxes

It won't be until next spring that tax statements will be figured for taxes payable in 2010.

The county assessor does not set taxes. Per state law, the assessor sets property value at 100 percent of fair market value. The assessment applies to taxes set by state and local governments and/or voter-approved levies. Just because your property assessment goes up 60 percent, it does not mean your taxes paid will rise 60 percent, Vandenberg noted.

The biggest portion of the property tax bill in Klickitat County for 2009 goes to local schools (23.4 %) and state government (24 %), followed by Klickitat County (13 % general fund plus 12 % Roads), hospitals and EMS (8 %), cities (6.2 %), fire districts (5.4 %), library (4 %), port (3 %), parks and cemetery districts (1 %.)